

# Troubleshooting: Dealing with Common Writing Problems

by April Kelley

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## Conventions

*Because problems with conventions are so numerous and varied, these are simply a few tips that might make teaching conventions and editing easier.*

1. ***Base editing lessons on the problems your students are encountering right now.***

Next time you are going through your students' work, keep a blank sheet of paper at your elbow, and write down the conventions problems that come up repeatedly. Stop when you hit 20 (for older students) or 10 (for younger students). Let each thing you jotted down be the basis for a mini lesson on conventions. Now your instruction is relevant, not a series of isolated mini lessons or drills, but instead a series of useful tips for struggling writers who need the information for their everyday work. Furthermore, incorporate the above idea of focused meaningful instruction into your daily oral language practice. Teach the editing skills they need at the current time rather than something that is not useful to them at the current time. If you have to do the editing for your students, it's too hard! :)

2. ***Model, Model, Model.*** Even though students do their own editing, you must show them what is correct, how to spot an error, and how to correct it using appropriate editor's symbols. Model often.

3. ***Take it one problem at a time.*** Teach students to spot one sort of error before moving onto the next one. Gradually add more and more to their repertoire until nothing escapes their glance.

4. ***Practice on the work of others.*** H.G. Wells once said, "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft." Take advantage of this human tendency by letting students edit someone else's writing for one specific convention (such as spelling) and then check their own writing copy for the very same kind of conventional error.

5. ***Avoid Worksheets.*** Research shows that students who are regularly subjected to worksheets become skilled in just that - completing worksheets. As an alternative, model use of conventions within the context of a real piece you are working on yourself and ask students to practice their editing skills on actual pieces of writing.

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some ideas taken from "Creating Writers" by Vicki Spandel and  
"Beginning Writing: Using the 6-trait Writing Framework" by Lori Jamison Rog

6. **Special Editing Pen.** Give the red pen (or any other color or highlighter) to the students and have them edit themselves. Editing their work for them does absolutely nothing for that student. If one of your students got 10 out of 20 multiplication problems wrong, would you do the problems for them or provide additional instruction and practice?
7. **Remember the 72 hour rule.** Time is the editor's friend. If you allow the students to wait 3 or more days between writing and editing, they'll edit much more efficiently. That mental break allows students to see their writing more the way they see someone else's writing.
8. **Edit Daily.** Editing Practice can be short (5-10 minutes) but in order to see results from your practice, it needs to be frequent and focussed on student needs.
9. **Respond to content first.** Respond to content first; then offer one or two suggestions on improving conventions.
10. **Use post-it dictionaries.** A word that is frequently misspelled in a students writing can be written on a post-it and placed in the corner of the paper to make correcting their spelling easier and less intimidating.
11. **Encourage students to read from the bottom up.** Because you can not skim easily when you read backwards, it makes it easier to catch errors.
12. **Encourage students to edit with their ears, not just their eyes.** Oral reading helps students punctuate, as well as notice missing or repeated words.
13. **Become sleuths.** Ask students to join you in hunting for samples of conventional problems in textbooks, memos, newspapers, etc. Give extra-credit points to students who can find a conventions problem in print and another point for leading the class in a lesson on correcting the problem.
14. **Support a coordinated editing program.** Ask students to edit (at least a little) in all subjects. Word-processing classes provide a great opportunity to do so. However, every content area - math, science, art, physical education - has its own conventions, symbols, and marks that help convey meaning. Help students to identify these in textbooks and other subject-related writings. Students could even conduct some mini-lessons on "The conventions of Algebra". Caution: Do not let the conventions become the focus of writing in these areas. Editing comes after the written draft!

15. ***Look for what's done right.*** Make sure to let the students know what conventions they're handling well. We learn to write primarily by building on our strengths and it's important for the teacher to encourage the student to see what has potential, what has strength, and what can be developed.
16. ***Use peer editing with caution.*** Teaming for practice is an excellent instructional strategy because no grade hangs in the balance. When editing is for real and the result is going to be graded, peer editing should be used with great caution. No one wants to edit herself into a lower grade than she would have received had she left the text alone!
17. ***Create a style sheet.*** Give your students a style sheet, which governs many issues of layout: size, format for headings, titles, models for handling citations, margin sizes, name placement, spacing, use of graphics or photographs, and other design issues. You may enlarge one copy and post it for students.
18. ***Encourage students to include samples of their editing practice in a portfolio or writing folder.*** These provide a visual representation of how their editing skills are growing. Can be shared with parents also.